

[Jack of Trades]

[Men Against Granite?]

Roaldus Richmond

Recorded in

Writers' Section Files

DATE: AUG 20 1940

JACK of TRADES

He was a slender man, with a [whimsical?] light in his blue eyes, and the term blacksmith seemed incongruous — until you noticed the strong hands and muscular forearms.

French himself, he had married a Swedish woman, cheerful and dependable. They had four children, the oldest girl just out of high school. And they all enjoyed one another's company, their own good times.

"I didn't come in with the strike-breakers from Canada in 1920, or was it '21," Alphonse said. "I was here long before that. My father had a farm outside Barre. Before that he farmed near Quebec, too. I was a kid when me moved down here, but I never kiked the farm. I tried a farm of my own [though?], after I got married. I've tried just about everything. But I didn't like it much farming. So we sold out and moved into town.

"I worked in a garage there. Always liked fooling around machines. Then I had a garage of my own. That went, too. We've had a funny life, Alice has always been a good sport about it. I'd make money in one thing and then lose it in another.

Library of Congress

"When I was young I learned blacksmithing and tool-sharpening. In them days the stonecutting tools went to regular blacksmith shops. Now of course the sheds have their own. I used to hang around in this blacksmith shop [?] the Hill because all the old guys hung out there. Real characters too, by God. And did they put the liquor into them. I never seen such drinking as those old-timers did. They drank enough to kill anything or anybody. And most [?] them lived to be old. They were tough old birds in those days! Strong old Scotchmen and Swedes and Irish. You couldn't kill 2 'em with an ax.

"I hang around listening to them talk, watching them drink, and learning about fires, forges, and hammering tools. Steel tools lose their edge fast on granite, you have to keep sharpening and sharpening them. Granite is hard; the men that work it have to be hard too.

"The Hill was some place in those days, wild and tough, [booming?] wide open. I took my first drink in that blacksmith shop. Old Jed Wygant gave it to me. I liked to choke me. I couldn't talk for ten minutes, choking and gasping, and with those old devils like to bust a gut laughing at me. Well, I've had my share to drink since that day, I guess.

"I cut it out, thought. My stomach is bad — ulcers. Probably from drinking and the food they gave us over across in the War. I was over there. I can't tell you how bad it was. You wouldn't think man could go through what us men did. And now they've started another one. People are such goddamn fools. It's hard to believe in God since I saw what I did on the other side. Probably there's Something — but not the God they preach about. And I've seen things happen in the quarries that a decent God never would let happen. My folks were all religious, too...

"I went to that new Veterans' Hospital down to White River Junction, but I didn't stay long. I'd rather be home. I don't mind not drinking, but I'd like to eat more once in awhile. Feel better, now I'm working again. The worst of being sick for me is to lay around doing nothing. I like to keep busy.

Library of Congress

"Besides working in the shed I got a roller-skating place we run nights, and we got pretty good business. Alice helps me out. I come home from work, take a bath, change, and eat. On this diet of mine it don't take long to eat. Then we drive down to the rink and we're there until midnight. 3 Not every night, but it makes a long day when we do. Alice ran it when I was sick. She's always been a good wife, a good woman, and tried to help me all she could. Summer nights when there's no roller-skating I work around the house or in the garden. There's always things to be done. On week-ends we take trips with the kids sometimes. Once a year Alice and I go away somewhere by ourselves. We have a good life together — we always did.

"I've worked beside Scotchmen, Italians, Spaniards, Swedes, and got along good with them, most all of them. Of course I had my share of fights when I was younger. I know they don't like the Frenchmen who came in to take their jobs. You can't blame them for that. They still won't have anything to do with some French families, and most of the French stick together. But it's different with us and they all know it, and we get along fine. My wife's folks were an old Swedish family here.

"My three brothers don't have anything to do with granite. They're all married now and we get together once or twice a year. They all got pretty good jobs. Outside of my own and my wife's people, me don't go out a whole lot. But lots of people call on us at home.

"I own my house and a good car. I don't owe money to nobody. Not enough to count, anyway. I've always liked to pay for things when I get them. My father taught me that, he was a pretty sharp shrewd fellow. But I couldn't do it if I depended just on working in the shed. I've always had a lot of other things going, and I've made investments. I know I had to if I wanted to bring up a family of four kids any kind of way right. I've had my fun too, spent a lot of money, and wasted some. But I never threw it around the way some of these stonecutters do. If a single guy gets in the habit of spending his week's pay like a sailor, he will break 4 out every so often even after he's married.

Library of Congress

"Talk about accidents! Just a year ago a [young?] fellow was killed up on the Hill. A big strapping fellow, not more than twenty or so. They were blasting in the spring — too early for blasting, everything damp and loose. A whole great ledge fell from the top rim. The man heard it break like thunder and they ran. It carried almost across the bottom, and this boy was caught under it. He must have tripped or something. One was on top of him with his head, shoulders and arms sticking out. They worked for three hours to get him out, and he was alive and conscious all the time. Conscious with his body crushed under that rock. He spoke to them while they worked. Gave them directions and everything. He even helped pass a chain under for them. Three hours he lay there... Jesus Christ! And he tried to joke with the blood coming out his mouth. 'I get my stone already,' he said. 'A good big one too.' And he tried to grin. Think of being three hours that way, by God! Then after they got him out he died.

"The next day there was hundreds of cars and people up there to look at the place. That quarry is 300 feet deep. They drove up there, whole families, men, women, even little kids playing around the cars. Some of them took their lunches, and made a regular picnic out of it. There were drunks with bottles and fellows with their arms around their girls. I tell you it turned my stomach, honest to God, to see those people act like that. I know that boy and all his family. I thought how they must feel. All those outsiders pointing and peering and talking about it. Still, I don't suppose that really mattered. And anyway I guess that's the way people are and the way the world is... Across the quarry, on top where the ledge fell, was a big sign. Big white letters on black wood. It said, 'Remember Safety first!'"